

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

24:15-28

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

One main subject of this part of our Lord's prophecy is the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans. That great event took place about forty years after the words we have now read were spoken. A full account of it is to be found in the writings of the historian Josephus. Those writings are the best comment on our Lord's words; they are a striking proof of the accuracy of every title of his predictions. The horrors and miseries which the Jews endured throughout the siege of their city exceed anything on record: it was truly a time of tribulation, so as was not since the beginning of the world. It surprises some to find so much importance attached to the taking of Jerusalem: they would rather regard the whole chapter as unfulfilled. Such persons forget that Jerusalem and the temple were the heart of the old Jewish dispensation. When they were destroyed, the old Mosaic system came to an end. The daily sacrifice, the yearly feasts, the altar, the holy of holies and the priesthood were all essential parts of revealed religion, till Christ came—but no longer. When he died upon the cross, their work was done: they were dead, and it only remained that they should be buried. But it was not fitting that this thing should be done quietly. The ending of a dispensation given with so much solemnity at Mount Sinai might well be expected to be marked with particular solemnity; the destruction of the holy temple, where so many old saints had seen shadows of good things to come, might well be expected to form a subject of prophecy: and so it was. The Lord Jesus specially predicts the desolation of the holy place. The great High Priest describes the end of the dispensation which had been a schoolmaster to bring men to himself. But we must not suppose that this part of our Lord's prophecy is exhausted by the first taking of Jerusalem. It is more than probable that our Lord's words have a further and deeper application still. It is more than probable that they apply to a second siege of Jerusalem, which is yet to take place when Israel has returned to their own land; and to a second tribulation on the inhabitants thereof, which will only be stopped by the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such a view of this passage may sound startling to some. But those who doubt its correctness would do well to study the last chapter of the prophet Zechariah, and the last chapter of Daniel. These two chapters contain solemn things: they throw great light on these verses we are now reading and their connection with the verses which immediately follow. It now remains for us to consider the lessons which this passage contains for our own personal edification. These lessons are plain and unmistakable: in them at least there is no darkness at all. For one thing we see that flight from danger may sometimes be the positive duty of a Christian. Our Lord himself commanded his people under certain circumstances to flee. The servant of Christ undoubtedly is not to be a coward. He is to confess his Master before men; he is to be willing to die, if needful, for the truth. But the servant of Christ is not required to run into danger unless it comes in the line of duty. He is not to be

ashamed to use reasonable means to provide for his personal safety, when no good is to be done by dying at his post. There is deep wisdom in this lesson. The true martyrs are not always those who court death and are in a hurry to be beheaded or burned. There are times when it shows more grace to be quiet, wait, pray and watch for opportunities, than to defy our adversaries and rush into the battle. May we have wisdom to know how to act in time of persecution! It is possible to be rash as well as to be a coward; and to stop our own usefulness by being over hot as well as being over cold. We see for another thing that in delivering this prophecy our Lord makes special mention of the Sabbath. "Pray ye, that your flight be not on the Sabbath day." This is a fact that deserves special notice. We live in times when the obligation of the Sabbath upon Christians is frequently denied by good men. They tell us that it is no more binding on us than the ceremonial law. It is difficult to see how such a view can be reconciled with our Lord's words on this solemn occasion. He seems intentionally to mention the Sabbath when he is foretelling the final destruction of the temple and the Mosaic ceremonies, as if to mark the day with honor. He seems to hint that although his people would be absolved from the yoke of sacrifices and ordinances, there would yet remain a keeping of a Sabbath for them (Hebrews 4:9). The friends of a holy Sunday ought carefully to remember this text. It is one which will bear much weight. We see for another thing that God's elect are always special objects of God's care. Twice in this passage our Lord mentions them. "For the elect's sake the days of tribulation are to be shortened." It will not be possible to deceive the elect. Those whom God has chosen to salvation by Christ are those whom God specially loves in this world: they are the jewels among mankind. He cares more for them than for kings on their thrones, if kings are not converted; he hears their prayers; he orders all the events of nations and issues of wars for their good and their sanctification; he keeps them by his Spirit; he allows neither men nor devil to pluck them out of his hand. Whatever tribulation comes on the world, God's elect are safe. May we never rest till we know that we are of this blessed number! There breathes not the man or woman who can prove that he is not one. The promises of the Gospel are open to all. May we give diligence to make our calling and election sure! God's elect are a people who cry unto him night and day. When Paul saw the faith, hope and love of the Thessalonians, then he knew their election of God (1 Thessalonians 1:4 ; see also Luke 18:7). Finally we see from these verses that whenever the second advent of Christ takes place it will be a very sudden event. It will be "As the lightning coming out of the east" and shining even to the west. This is a practical truth that we should ever keep before our minds. That our Lord Jesus will come again in person to this world we know from Scripture. That he will come in a time of great tribulation; we also know; but the precise period, year, month, day and hour are all hidden things. We only know that it will be a very sudden event. Our plain duty then is to live always prepared for his return. Let us walk by faith and not by sight; let us believe on Christ, serve Christ, follow Christ, and love Christ. So living whenever Christ may return we shall be ready to meet him.

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